

Committee on Resources

Testimony

Testimony of Jeri Ledbetter

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As a professional river guide as well as an aircraft owner and pilot, I have been actively involved with the issue of aircraft noise over our national parks for nearly 10 years. As past president of Grand Canyon River Guides I focused on our worst example, Grand Canyon National Park. I have never been compensated for this work, and I am here today at my own expense. I provide this testimony because I am profoundly concerned about a cherished resource - natural quiet - whose steady deterioration I have witnessed over the years.

I have flown over the Canyon as well as spent a great deal of time within its walls. Although there is room for many types of visitation, we must strike a better balance. And we must see to it that what has happened in Grand Canyon is not allowed to occur in our other national parks. There should be places in the world where one may escape the ever increasing clamor of technology. When I was a child I visited Grand Canyon, and it was such a place - a quiet and serene sanctuary. It is no more.

With the Overflights Act, Congress sent a clear and visionary message that Grand Canyon is a unique treasure worthy of protection, and that natural quiet is a resource to be valued. Yet with no limit to the number of flights and a lot of foot dragging by the FAA, the problem remains far from solved; in fact the noise has reached an unacceptable level.

No one form of visitation should be allowed to become so pervasive that it impacts all others, as is the case with air tours in Grand Canyon. Granted, more than 800,000 people visit the Canyon by air each year, compared to a relative few on the backcountry trails or on the river. There's a reason there are so few, and it isn't lack of demand. The National Park Service strictly limits the number of visitors by foot, mule, or boat in spite of demand, in spite of potential profits. The goal is protection of both the resource and visitor experience.

Permits for most backcountry trails must be obtained months in advance, commercial river trips a year or more. Rafters may wait 10 years to obtain a private permit to run the Colorado River. Such restrictions are necessary and consistent with the National Park Service's mandate to protect the resource. Why should air tours be the sole exception? Calling for limits on the number of air tours isn't elitist, nor is it unreasonable. Such action is consistent with the goals of the National Park Service as well as the Overflights Act.

The FAA, however, has not received this message. They cast aside most of the National Park Service's recommendations, not on the basis of safety, but purely to protect the economic interests of the air tour industry. The rule, now delayed yet again, still falls far short of the goal.

Every step of the way, air tour operators claim imposition of flight rules will drive them out of business. To the contrary, their businesses flourish, compounding the noise problem and necessitating a revision of flight rules.

For those who argue that an air tour has no lasting impact, I ask at what point they are willing to cease all operations? Ten years? Twenty? They don't ever plan to stop, so how can they claim their impact isn't as permanent as a footprint?

Some claim that air tours are the only way the disabled and elderly can see Grand Canyon. Yet no part of this rule would preclude anyone from taking an air tour. We respect the value of accessibility. However, the disabled tire of being told what they cannot do. They have faced the word "can't" all too often, for much too long. To their credit, many have tested their limits and discovered just how much they can do. I see the elderly and the disabled on the river in greater numbers every year, as well as on the trails, and I find that inspirational. It is not only inaccurate, but it is also illegal, to

suggest the disabled may only visit our national parks by air.

Change comes hard, but in our national parks different rules apply than those to which the air tour industry and the FAA are accustomed. Economic interests must take a back seat to resource protection. Operating within our national parks for profit is a privilege, not a right.

These are difficult concepts for some, as evidenced by some tour operators' outright refusal to pay airspace fees mandated by Congress. Some operators significantly underreported the number of aircraft and flights, which caused glaring inaccuracies in the computer model and wasted a huge amount of time at taxpayer expense. This shows a contempt for Congress, for the National Park Service, and for the Grand Canyon over which they fly for profit. Yet the FAA accepts with a shrug the lies and the arrogance, proposing to increase the number of aircraft allowed to fly over the Canyon by almost double.

We must develop a national policy to protect our national parks and wilderness areas from the intrusion of aircraft noise. The National Park Service, not the FAA, should have the authority to determine whether or not air tours are appropriate in individual park units, such as Rocky Mountain. This national policy should direct the FAA to focus purely on safety, leaving resource decisions to the National Park Service.

I spend weeks at a time rowing boats through Grand Canyon. We actually spend very little time in rapids. Most of the time we float through quiet stretches of river or explore narrow, secluded side canyons. In these areas, natural ambient sounds are astonishingly low. The sounds of the river and Canyon are an important part of the experience. We quietly listen to the call of a canyon wren, the trickle of a small stream, a light breeze through a cottonwood, the murmur of the river, or the frustrated shriek of a falcon who just missed his lunch. These experiences are violated, and Grand Canyon cheapened by the increasing onslaught of mechanized sound from the air.

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